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# ANGER

## Kenneth Anger, director of the classic gay films 'Fireworks' and 'Scorpio Rising', and author of the scandalous 'Hollywood Babylon', talks about his world to Godfrey Hamilton

**"Of *course*," says Kenneth Anger, "James Dean was completely gay. All the talk about his girlfriends was the game they play in Hollywood. And they're still playing it."**

Anger, Hollywood Gossipist Extraordinaire, gives away the naughty secrets of California's sequinned cesspit with a nonchalent directness so that the place takes on the excitement of an exquisite, but deadly serpent. "You see," he continues, "Marlon Brando told Hollywood to fuck off. He was never interviewed by Hedda Hopper or Louella Parsons but Jimmy Dean was. He would go into the Warner Brothers commissary and spit on the pictures of the stars; he loved to shock people in these ways but he still played the game of the nominal girlfriend. But he was *definitely* into S/M . . ."

Kenneth Anger has illuminated the dark side of Sunset Boulevard with his legendary book *Hollywood Babylon*. An underground classic for fifteen years, the authorised, updated version was published last year in the States by Dell but WH Allen, who have the option on it here, are wary of libel suits. "At least we have real freedom of the press in America," says Anger.

### Spells and enchantments

But the book is primarily important because its success provides the means for Anger to continue making films. And it is for his films that he is most celebrated. The cinemagical spells and enchantments that express Anger's raison d'etre. He is a practising magician (by all accounts, a rather powerful one) and a student of Aleister Crowley and, yes, most people do feel oh-so-slightly apprehensive about meeting him.

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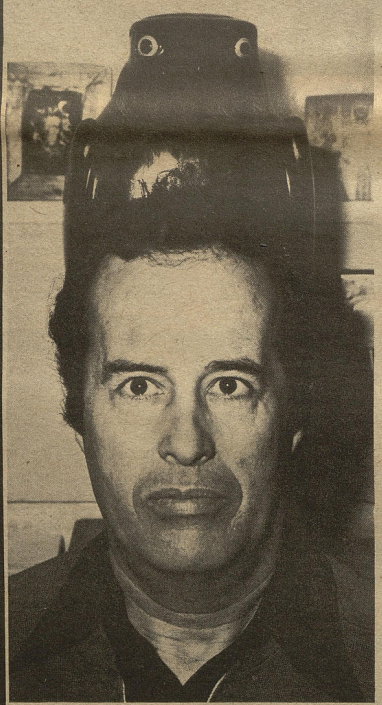
In fact, he looks as unlikely a magician as you could hope to meet, dressed in well-worn denims and nursing a heavy cold. He looks rather prim, but his full lips suggest a sensual nature, and the permanently worried expression in his dark hazel eyes make him look, in fact, rather puckish.



Photograph: Bob Workman (Gay News)

At the moment he is in London working on the final cut of his first full-length film *Lucifer Rising* which he began in 1970. It will open in the autumn probably, and Anger would ideally like it to open on the Winter Equinox. "It's the kind of film that takes you into another dimension, a reflection of what I think is happening on the astral plane. You see, the difference between me and the people who directed *The Omen* and *The Exorcist* is that I *believe* in the Occult."

### Dark force

His office reflects his interests: film ephemera jostles for space with pictures of Aleister Crowley, a painting of Lucifer hangs next to a cherished photograph of Sabu, the child star of *Elephant Boy*, who became one of Anger's close friends. There is also a trunk filled with first editions of Crowley's books and an original Augustus John portrait of the master magician. The contents of the little room must be worth a fortune.

Anger's films raise potent forces. And not just in the spectator's head. "When I first showed *Invocation Of My Demon Brother* (a short with nerve-jangling musical score by Mick Jagger on the Moog) at the Edinburgh Festival, the Church of Scotland which was *right next door*, just burst into flames. It's a Magickal coincidence, if you like. What emerges is quite a dark force . . . The film was made at the time of the Viet-Nam war, after all. *Lucifer Rising* is more light . . . in the sense of more positive."

His first publicly exhibited film was *Fireworks* in which a youth (played by Anger) is raped and savaged by a gang of sailors with awesome torsos. At the literal climax of the film, a sailor unzips his fly and out looms a burning Roman Candle. The image remains one of the screen's most powerful visual metaphors for orgasm. "I should point out," Anger says, "that the sailors in it were *real* sailors. I couldn't afford to rent or make any costumes. But, although I hate to disillusion people, I must say that even the sailors are playing a part. I do wish I could find people that agreeable today."

The sailors in *Fireworks* degenerate from narcissistic body-freak posing to brutality in a stylised ritual of violence which both anticipated and outdid the balletic beat-ups of *Clockwork Orange*. Semen and blood spurt over Anger's body, his viscera are pulled apart and then, in a waspish visual pun, his heart is revealed to be—literally—a ticker.

### Dream situation

"The film was certainly very erotic for me but nothing *remotely* similar ever happened to me. It's a dream situation, a personal catharsis. And I can tell you that you can search the world high and low, and you won't find sailors like that today. In the Twenties, Thirties and Forties, the US sailor was a gay sex symbol. British sailors were never quite so . . . so . . . *insane*. You never knew if these guys were going to beat you up. They'd go with you, then get violent afterwards. That was a salve to their conscience, it justified their action. Of course, every year thousands, not hundreds, of servicemen are given a dishonourable discharge because they're gay." We decide that sounds like a discreet reference to a VD symptom and Anger allows himself a relaxed laugh.

*Fireworks* is all the more astonishing when one remembers that when he made the film in 1947, Kenneth Anger was just 17. "It was made in 72 hours," he says with the throwaway indifference of enormous pride. And it is also astonishing that for a talent that was (and still is) so precocious, Anger suffered from no Alienated-Tortured-Childhood-Syndrome.

He was born near Hollywood in Santa Monica, the son of an aeronautics engineer. His early years were suitably Magickal, suitably influenced by Hollywood mores. He looks ruefully at a coil of celluloid lying on the workbench and says, apropos of nothing, "it's so fragile, so perishable." His first experience of the ephemeral quality of celluloid was at the age of 3½ when his grandmother, who was wardrobe mistress at Warners, introduced him to Max Reinhardt who cast him as the Changeling Prince in his version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (the one with Cagney as Bottom).

> "To me, it was like a real fairyland. I didn't differentiate between the scenery and the technicalities of it . . . Then, one day the moonbeams caught fire."

### A real fairyland

Anger's memory of the film is extraordinarily vivid: "To me, it was like a real fairyland. I didn't differentiate between the scenery and the technicalities of it—the wire, the glue, the arc lights. Then, one day, the moonbeams caught fire. These were the moonbeams for the fairies to run up, steel steps under cellophane which made a frightful crunching sound. It sounded like elephants stamping on sugar cane. The arc lights were very hot and suddenly this staircase burst into flames while the fairies were still climbing. They were kids, five to twelve years old; nude except for their shredded cellophane costumes. Hah! . . a few . . . got their bottoms singed . . ."

Anger has retained a Hollywood talent for self-publicity, a fact which he confesses as we dash out to the nearest newsagent directly he hears that there is a piece on him in the *New Musical Express*. He must have it *now* and he is rather peeved that the paper isn't delivered to the shop until one o'clock and it's only 12.30. Finally it arrives and he makes marvellous copy: the magician casting spells on rock stars who've crossed him. More specifically, the guitarist Jimmy Page [of Led Zepplin] who was composing the soundtrack for *Lucifer Rising*.

Perhaps he's overdone it and Anger wonders if it was such dangerously oversimplified quarter-truths that led to the vilification of Aleister Crowley. Anger has devoted 25 years of his life to Crowley—pronounced "Croe-ley", he insists, not "Crau-ley"—and the man's wretched persecution and lethal notoriety should be a caution against any tendencies to glamourise a magician's craft. But, although Anger is aware of this, when a journalist telephones him for some quotes about the Jimmy Page saga, his mischievous public persona takes over and he says: "I haven't *tried*, I've *done* it . . . I'm a magician, after all. I've burned him in effigy!"

### Primeval justice

In actual fact, Anger explains that he sacked Jimmy Page, also a student of Crowley, because he was not happy about his work on the film. There were also personal disputes involved and Anger's reaction was to ritually isolate Page, banish him from his consciousness. It was reminiscent of the burning of love letters after an affair has

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finished bitterly and there is a primeval justice to it that appeals to Anger more than Christian notions of forgiveness. "When Alexander the Great found that his boyfriend had been killed in battle, he was devastated by grief and had the entire population of a city slaughtered. He never repented afterwards."

England remains a little sedate in the face of this kind of philosophy. Americans can perhaps accept it more easily. Anger agrees: "America is *surreal*. Even the gay bars. Occasionally I go to the New York bars and it's a bit of a joke. I mean, when hairdressers start dressing up in leather, not that I'm prejudiced against hairdressers . . . Anyway, what you get in the bars is a kind of desperate searching around for a one night stand. Again, I don't really condemn it, it's a phase people have to go through."

In case that sounds patronising, it's worth remembering that Anger's film *Scorpio Rising* was a homoerotic leather fable still unsurpassed, particularly in its audacious comedy: juxtaposing a bikeboy orgy with clips from De Mille's silent *King of Kings*—Jesus giving eyesight to the blind while the Crystals intone "He's A Rebel" on the soundtrack.

A further demonstration of the power of Anger's films is offered by the recollection of *Scorpio Rising* which, for many people, contained an orgy of buggery and sadism. The orgy isn't actually in the film. There is a Hallowe'en party that gets a little riotous but what has happened is that people think they have seen all manner of lusty behaviour, so cunningly has the sequence of images been put together. "I just happened to fall in with that set of bike riders," claims Anger, "and they were all very willing and

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cooperative when it came to being photographed. The central figure, Bruce Byron, was an ex-marine. He'd been in the brig a lot of times and he really had this James Dean thing. He changed his name to incorporate Dean's middle name, Byron. He'd been in the brig a lot of times and the last I heard of him he was a cab driver in Manhattan. Probably the archetypal model for *Taxi Driver*. As for the orgy, I didn't direct any of that. It was just what happened that night. I brought along a keg of beer as my contribution, and my camera. The boys were basically bisexual, in fact, predominantly heterosexual. Their girlfriends were watching them and laughing. They really didn't care. I think it really became an ethnographic study of working class Italian-Americans playing around. The Italians lose their inhibitions quickly but so do White Anglo-Saxon Protestants if you get them stoned or drunk. Actually I find the gay bike scene with the red handkerchief in the left pocket, and the keys dangling from this or that side to denote sadist or masochist . . . I find it very boring."

### Juggling

But with all the Rough Malehood bursting out of the frames of Anger's films, one tends to assume that the beefsteak, stay-hungry muscle babies are His Type. Not so: "No, I don't like that, over-muscled . . . I do like people who keep their bodies in shape though." So what is His Type? He answers first by saying What Isn't: "The person who is not my type is like"—and here he mentions the name of a lauded rock guitarist—"who has a deathly fear of physical contact, to the extent of it being a phobia. What in Reichian terms is called 'character armour'. I like to hug people, and I don't mean grope them. I mean things like putting my hands on their shoulders. Crowley was a great believer in physical sensuality. The kind of people I've got involved with are borderline psychopaths, I'm afraid, with a strong element of insanity in them. I seem to respond to that type—it's like juggling with nitroglycerin."

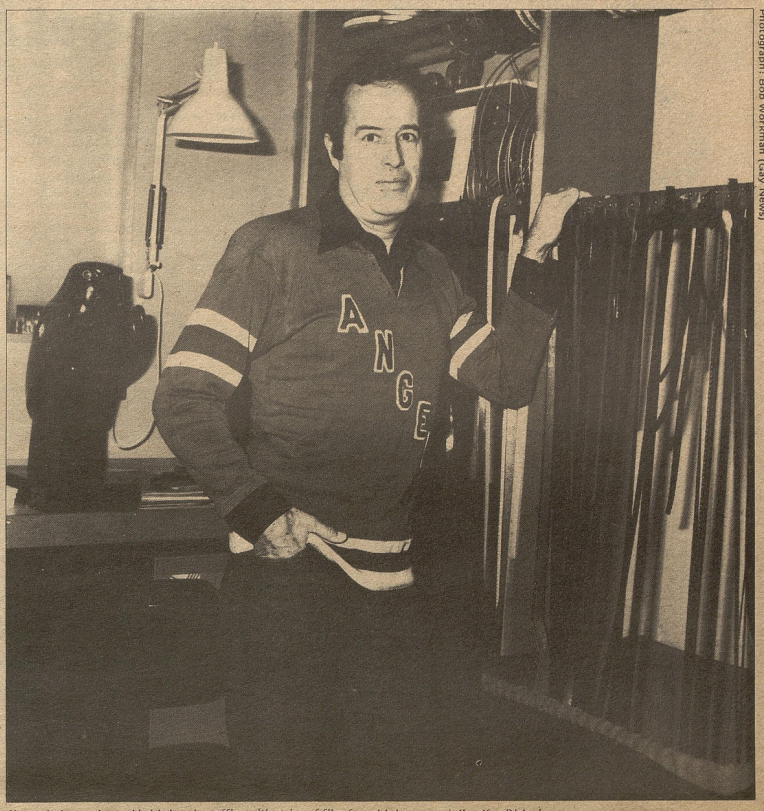
His main emotional relationship is with Lucifer. Here he is difficult, circumspect. "Lucifer," he says, "is powerful. He is beautiful. But he's a tricky spirit. I personally am having a love affair with a very difficult, invisible lover. I wouldn't"—he looks me in the eye—"recommend him to anyone else." He shows me a painting of Lucifer as one would proudly show off a photo of one's lover. Perhaps Anger really is jealously in love, aspiring to some sort of consummation, a Magickal orgasm with a lover who is maddeningly elusive. "My Lucifer," he says protectively, "is a very sympathetic spirit. You couldn't call him a demon or an angel." And, as if worried that I might snigger at the idea, he adds "I happen to believe in these things the way some people believe in the Communist Party. Lucifer is basically a god of beauty, light and love. But he's fallen from his throne and has to work his way back up."

### Patron saint

All Anger's films are part of a promotion campaign on behalf of Lucifer and if the concept of Lucifer as a loving spirit sounds like Something Diabolical, it's worth remembering that nowhere in the Bible is there any connection between Lucifer and the Devil. In fact, the only Lucifer mentioned is a king of Babylon, but most Christians, of course, don't know that. At least, Lucifer is a sound metaphor for the rebelliousness of the spirit that promotes change. "From people like James Dean back to Rimbaud,

**"The age of consent . . is ridiculous. Everything's illegal when the sex drives are the strongest."**

there is a Luciferian element as there is in all political revolution. Lucifer is the patron saint of rebellion." Which means, of course, that Jesus Christ had a Luciferian element in him and so "He's A Rebel" isn't such an arbitrary choice for Jesus' theme music. "Just think," Anger exclaims delightedly, "what *Scorpio Rising* would *do* to Mary Whitehouse!"




Photograph: Bob Workman (Gay News)

*Kenneth Anger pictured in his London office with strips of film from his latest work 'Lucifer Rising'*

As well as Magickal allusions, Anger's movies have the common denominator of idealised homosexual archetypes. Anger's concern with gay rights prompted him to attend the debates of the late Sixties which resulted in the Sexual Offences Bill becoming law. "It struck me that there were some sane, reasonable men and some bigots. Repression can be politically motivated; an anti-gay stance appeals to a lot of voters. But it's a cultural thing too, reinforced by things like Queen Victoria's laws. But these barriers are gradually . . . breaking up. The age of consent, though, is ridiculous. Everything's illegal when the sex drives are the strongest."

But Anger agrees that the nascent gay awareness developed as part of the hippie dream curdled in its own pretensions. "All that Sweetness and Light just wasn't true. It isn't even good show business anymore. *Hair* now seems so dated." Now there's a New Hollywood—the harsh rock world. "I like to observe that world without being involved. There's no glamour, it's strident—a reflection of our times."

### Plastic imitation

Anger gets a little sour at this point and the bile flows out to drench Mick Jagger. "Mick should have credited me with *Sympathy For The Devil*." Jagger was set to play Lucifer in the new film, but the game he played slapped him in the face at Altamont, and he stepped down from the role. So, Anger briefly considered Mick's brother, Chris "who turned out to be a cheap, plastic imitation of his plastic brother." Now the role is played by an actor called Leslie Huggins. Lilith is played by Marianne Faithful "and she's the demon of destruction so it sort of fitted the part, the fact that she was on smack at the time." Mentioning Marianne, Anger retracts his claws. "I won't say I helped cure her, but I certainly made her see that she couldn't continue working on that stuff. Look, she will never be a 'good girl', but we are good friends and that's all I'm going to say about her."

It's infuriating trying to write about Anger because so much is unprintably scandalous. There's a bit of gossip about the Who, for example, and Paul Newman . . . My lips are sealed and anyway Anger doesn't want the details printed because they're going into his new book. What is clear is that Hollywood was, and is, populated by what Anger calls "functional neurotics," who have channeled their angst into their work. Joan Crawford, for example, is always washing her hands as if, like Lady Macbeth, she can wash away the stain of the dark past. "She really worked her way up from nothing," confides Anger, "and made these very tame, anodyne stag films that she's always denying. I just wish she'd admit it . . . She's a real martinet. Did you know that she once said she's going to be buried with a Pepsi Cola bottle? Hah! . . . she didn't say where she'd put it."

Thousands of people ache to have a bite at the pulp of a Star's fruity sex life. But, paradoxically, they don't really want to believe the disclosures. Doubters would do well to remember that Kenneth Anger knew many of the Babylon babes personally. Like Gary Cooper. "I knew him in Paris," he says in defence of his revelation that Cooper slept his way up the ladder. "He was kept for a while by a Texas millionaire. His sleeping with men—he was bisexual—was opportunistic. When I knew him, he was making *Love In The Afternoon*. That's when he decided to have his eyebags lifted."

Then, of course, there are Anger's photographs of the

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stars at play. "There's this extraordinary, *authentic* picture taken in the mid-Fifties when . . . ['a very famous star'] was still cute. He's sucking this cock, obviously out of his head, at a party. In front of all these other people. I know he's come out and said he's had affairs with men, but this picture is rather more indiscreet. I'm thinking of sending it out as a Christmas card."

### No mummies

The question springs immediately to mind: Wouldn't *he* react a little stiffly if a bright journalist were to do an *Anger Babylon*, an autopsy without an anaesthetic on Anger's own long-gone past? "Uhhhh . . . I don't *think* so," he says carefully, as though the thought hadn't occurred to him before. "If the things they wrote were true, I'd let it go, obviously. And if they weren't . . . well, if they made a particular point, or if it made funny reading . . . I'd probably still let it go. If they weren't, then I'd certainly write a letter to the editor. I'm a great letter writer, anyway. But, it's all fair in love and war, and if anyone found my life that interesting and wanted to dig up my past, they wouldn't find any great black secrets. There are no—huh—mummies in my basement. If I was in the closet about anything I might get worried, but I've made statements about smoking grass and I've been a declared gay since I was a teenager. My position is never that of a moralist, anyway. It's an empathetic viewpoint."

If Anger was an impartial observer when Hollywood opened its tell-tale heart, the visceral morsels are all the more delectable for the easy bitchiness with which he offers them. But Anger expresses himself most eloquently on film. Every picture tells a story. No words could match the images in *Lucifer Rising*: a storm gathering from a brooding sky; Lucifer glowering from the middle of a Magick Circle inscribed 'Lilith/Lucifer/Babalon/Chaos'; a flying saucer descending in the Valley of the Kings; Lilith communing with the ancient sun. This is Anger the Mage conjuring Lucifer as he simultaneously evokes the Luciferian energy of the unharnessed elements.

Is the work ready for this tapping of its collective unconscious? Anger is invoking real monsters from the Id and elsewhere. Going home on the tube after our interview, I was making a slightly stunned reassessment of the brave old world. I wanted to nudge my fellow-passengers and shake them up a little. "Hey, did you know that Lyndon Johnson wouldn't allow Rock Hudson onto his ranch because he had his friend with him? Would you like details of a blue-eyed Superstar's secret assignations in Manhattan?"

With the Superstar ikons smashed, the world turns upside down. And why not? There's a rebelliousness at work in these impulses, and Kenneth Anger has a name for it: "Heads is tails, just call me Lucifer. In need of some restraint . . ." □

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